

MARCH 2007 PROGRAM NOTES

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Franz Schubert's most prolific year as a composer came in 1815, which witnessed the completion of his second and third symphonies, two full-scale Masses, several chamber works, and an astonishing one hundred forty-four songs, including his masterful setting of Goethe's *Erlkönig*. At a time when much of the German-speaking world was celebrating Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and Americans were awaiting the newly chartered railroad on the Atlantic coast, Schubert was quietly putting forth dozens of compositions, many of which would become staples of the nineteenth-century repertory. His works from that time demonstrate a remarkable depth of expression and level of compositional maturity, especially notable given that in January of that year he celebrated but his eighteenth birthday.

In a musical culture that centered almost exclusively in Vienna, Schubert stands out as a rarity. Unlike Mozart, Beethoven, and a handful of other successful composers whom the Viennese gladly claimed as their own, Schubert was native to that city, and remained there until his brief life was cut short by typhoid fever in 1828. Schubert's widespread fame and respect largely arrived posthumously: during his lifetime he labored under the daunting shadow of Beethoven and the fanatic popularity of Rossini. Drawing from a small but committed circle of friends and fellow artists, he supported himself through teaching and publication, living in relative obscurity. Indeed, his manuscript copy of *Erlkönig*, which he submitted to the preeminent publishing firm Breitkopf und Härtel, was rejected and then mistakenly returned to another bearing his surname, and the *Mass No. 2 in G Major*, performed this afternoon, was not to be published until decades after his death. Small in stature (he stood less than 5'2") and prone to bouts of illness, Schubert never married, devoting himself instead to composition, teaching, and salon performances. His music ultimately came to embody a unique Classical-Romantic aesthetic, steeped in the formal traditions of the eighteenth century but deeply imbued with the harmonic and expressive spontaneity of the nineteenth.

Schubert's *Mass No. 2 in G Major*, composed in a mere six days in March 1815, is modestly scored for soprano, tenor, and bass soloists, mixed chorus, organ, and strings. Gentlest of Masses, it was intended for performance in Schubert's parish church, in which his earlier Mass had been well-received. The *Mass* is compositionally conservative: the soloist passages are lyrical and unpretentious, the texture is largely homophonic, and the harmonies are smooth and restrained. Several passages, particularly in the *Credo*, present nearly textbook examples of the *stile antico*, an approach to sacred composition that harkens back to the controlled dissonance and clear text declamation mandated by the Roman Catholic church during the Counter Reformation. But Schubert's *Mass* is no pedantic exercise: passages of soaring lyricism abound, punctuated by Schubert's penchant for unconventional harmonic fluidity. Both were to become hallmarks of the Romantic style.

The "Kyrie", with its traditional three-part structure, is framed by the chorus; the writing is harmonically stable and rhythmically agile. The central "Christe" section is taken up by the soprano soloist; it is believed that Schubert intended it for the singer Therese Grob, to whom he unsuccessfully proposed marriage some months earlier. Darker in color, the "Christe" contrasts with the surrounding choral passages by suggesting a more personal and direct plea for mercy. The "Gloria" takes a jubilant turn, until the soprano and bass soloists enter with the more plaintive "Domine Deus", supported by choral declamations of "miserere nobis".

The hypnotic "Credo", entrusted in full to the choir, recalls Baroque ostinati in its detached bassline, supported by homophonic choral writing and a few harmonic surprises. Only twice is the homophony broken by strong declamatory octaves, both times in response to text that underscores the triune. And twice Schubert includes in the strings the well-established figure of a descending chromatic line from tonic to dominant, widely understood in the Renaissance and Baroque eras as an expression of lament. For all its traditional reverence, Schubert's only significant departure from Catholic tradition occurs in this movement: he deliberately omitted the phrases *Et unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam* and *Et expecto resurrectionem* ("I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church" and "I expect the resurrection"), indicative of his rather liberal view toward Christianity. Later publishers stubbornly reinserted both phrases but it is Schubert's original version that will be sung today.

The "Sanctus" begins majestically, accompanied by dotted rhythms suggestive of the French Overture style. Further allusions to Baroque styles of composition continue in the Benedictus. It begins with all three soloists; the soprano figure is taken up contrapuntally by the tenor and bass, and the movement concludes with a rousing four-part fugue

for the chorus. The *Mass* concludes tranquilly with the “Agnus Dei”, alternating between soloists and chorus and thus giving expression to both collective and personal pleas for mercy.

If Franz Schubert is counted as one of the Romantic era’s most gifted lyrical composers, Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) must surely be another. Born in Norway, Grieg fell under the spell of nationalism that swept Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, and he devoted much of his career to the incorporation and promotion of Norwegian folksong and music tradition, to the intense delight of his compatriots. And so, quite unlike Schubert, Grieg was wildly popular during his lifetime, only to be regarded unfavorably by early twentieth-century critics and progressives almost immediately upon his death. Claude Debussy, not known for his benevolence toward other composers, unceremoniously dubbed Grieg’s music as “bonbons wrapped in snow.” But history has been kinder to Grieg, and his exceptional gift for melodic writing, combined with an adventurous sense of harmonic expansion, place him among the nineteenth century’s canon of enduring composers.

Grieg’s formal training was thoroughly conventional: showing prodigious talent at a young age, he pursued his musical studies at the Leipzig Conservatory, studying piano with Ignaz Moscheles and composition with Carl Reinecke. A strong pianist and conductor, Grieg was encouraged to pursue music as a profession by the great Norwegian violinist Ole Bull. And although he recalled his years in Leipzig with some bitterness, Grieg was tremendously influenced by his German training. His early works bear the compositional imprint of Mendelssohn and Schumann, and he was inclined toward German form and structural design throughout his long career. A miniaturist at heart, Grieg wrote over sixty-six *Lyrical Pieces*; they are his most well-known of his piano works. Most are brief ternary (ABA) forms, some extending to an ABABA design. The *Lyrical Pieces*, Op. 12, are the first set that Grieg published (1867). This was an especially happy period in his life: newly married to his cousin, the soprano Nina Hagerup, and recently named conductor of the Philharmonic Society in Norway, Grieg was already beginning to explore the folk and patriotic music of his native land as sources of musical inspiration. His voice as a nationalist composer appears throughout Op. 12, and they remain some of his most beloved piano pieces.

Grieg had a particular affection for the theme he used in the *Arietta*: some forty years later, he rewrote it as the last piece in the last set of his *Lyrical Pieces*. By this time, his compositional style had matured considerably, and nowhere is Grieg’s ingenuity more prominent than in his post-1900 music. Tonality as a guiding musical principle had its days numbered in the waning nineteenth century, particularly in the hands of late Romantics such as Wagner, Mahler, and Wolf, and Grieg was no stranger to harmonic invention. He was fond of extending dominant chords far beyond their tonal constraints and alternating between perfect and augmented intervals, yet he never lost sight of his lyrical roots. His Op. 70 settings of texts by Otto Benzon are a case in point: exploring fully the resources of both voice and piano, Grieg retains an overarching sense of tonality while proceeding through a dizzying array of keys in the interim. At times reminiscent of the grand traditions of Romanticism, at others approaching the impressionist technique championed by Debussy and Ravel, Grieg’s late songs demonstrate the stylistic skill of a composer who both drew from and contributed to a rapidly changing musical aesthetic.

In his later years and despite failing health, Grieg continued to work and travel tirelessly, and was in fact hours from embarking on a tour to England when he fell ill and died in June 1907. His last published work, the song cycle Op. 74, had appeared just months earlier. Scored for mixed choir and baritone, the *Four Psalms* are one of Grieg’s only works on a religious topic. Based on both traditional folksong and ancient sacred psalms, the texts are drawn from the baroque poetry of Hans Adolf Brorson (no. 1 and 2), Hans Thomissen (no. 3) and Laurentius Laurentii (no. 4). There is a strong sense of sacred austerity and melodic expression in these psalm settings – and some remarkable passages of dissonance. The first psalm, for example, moves ambiguously between the major and minor modes, and the second contains a striking middle section in which the male choir sings in B minor, while the soloist’s material proceeds simultaneously in the parallel major. The haunting third psalm, antiphonal in structure, is rich and daring in its choral homophony. The cycle concludes more brightly, with a calm and lilting rhythm and profundity of expression that supports the optimism of the text. As a group, the *Four Psalms* represent the pinnacle of Grieg’s achievement as a composer, demonstrating his harmonic inventiveness, natural lyricism, elastic approach to formal design, and unique and creative expression of Norwegian sentiment. Their performance today is a befitting tribute to him on this centennial anniversary of his death.